

Beyond Cana

John 2.1-11; Isaiah 62.1-5

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Claudette Colvin. Do you know who she is? A fifteen year old, riding a Montgomery, Alabama, bus home from school, Colvin refused to give up her seat to a white person.

Rosa Parks. You know her. In 1955, she, too, refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery bus. But Colvin sat silently in her seat and ignored bus driver Robert Cleere's orders to move to the back of the bus nine months before Rosa Parks gained national attention for committing the same act of civil disobedience.

Rosa Parks was not the first black woman to keep her seat. Nor was Colvin. Irene Morgan refused to move on a Greyhound Lines bus bound for Baltimore in 1944; her case was tried before the US Supreme Court by Thurgood Marshall in 1946. Sarah Keys refused to move from a Carolina Coach Company bus in 1952. Aurelia Browder, Susie McDonald, Mary Louise Smith, and of course Claudette Colvin, all held their seats on Montgomery buses in 1955; and, the four of them (not Rosa Parks) became the plaintiffs in *Browder vs. Gayle*, the 1956 US District Court civil case that ended segregation on Montgomery buses.

When Colvin was arrested in March 1955, Edgar Nixon, the leader of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, Clifford Durr, a white lawyer and activist in the civil rights movement, and Martin Luther King, Jr. looked into her case to see if her case might become the test to challenge bus segregation in Alabama and the Jim Crow laws; but, they decided to wait for a better case to pursue. Rosa Park's case, nine months later, compelled Martin Luther King, Jr. and Edgar Nixon to organize the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which King led.

Dr. King had been called to become the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery only one year before leading the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The boycott effectively began King's public ministry and his rise as a prominent leader within the Civil Rights Movement.

Dr. King—and others—saw the segregation in the public bus system not only as a local problem and an abuse of power by some bus drivers, but also as a symptom of a larger system of institutionalized injustice and government sanctioned discrimination. It wasn't just an issue of a few people occasionally having to change seats—having to move to the back of the bus. It wasn't just an issue of black people

having to step into the front door of the bus, pay their fare, exit the bus, and get back on using the rear door. Sometimes bus drivers would drive off before a paying passenger could re-enter the rear of the bus. It wasn't an issue of personal inconvenience or even losing your bus fare to an unethical driver. It was the indignity of the system which marginalized and disempowered human beings. And the Montgomery bus policies were a local symptom of a national system of oppression and violence.

Dr. King saw beyond the symptom to how this larger injustice actually injured all of God's people—black and white—and how it kept them from living into the fullness of God's creation and the realization of Jesus's vision of the Reign of God—the Kingdom of Heaven—here and now. King looked beyond Montgomery, Alabama, and saw a state, a country, and even a world likened to Heaven, with all of humanity living in peace, with justice and equality.

In Montgomery, Alabama, we see the beginning of Dr. King's public ministry; and in the second chapter of John's gospel we see the beginning of Jesus's public ministry.

On the third day [after John the Baptist testifies that Jesus is the Son of God] there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. (John 2.1-11)

It is an odd story, by gospel standards. John's gospel begins Jesus's public ministry with a simple miracle akin to a magic trick: turning water into wine. Mark's gospel begins Jesus's public ministry in Galilee with Jesus teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath and casting an unclean spirit out of a man who is in the synagogue. Luke also begins Jesus's Galilean ministry with Jesus reading the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue and then healing the man with the unclean spirit on the Sabbath. And Matthew introduces the beginning of the Galilean ministry with Jesus teaching in the synagogues and healing "those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics" (Matthew 4.25).

John, however, does not unveil the beginning of Jesus's public ministry with profound teachings and miraculous healings; John launches Jesus's public ministry with a seemingly insignificant miracle. This miracle does not save a life, exorcise a demon, or return life to a dead child; it does not restore an outcast person back into

the life of the community. Turning water into wine—miraculous though it may be—seems to do nothing more than make a bridegroom look good to his guests (and possibly improve Jesus’s mother’s status among the bridegroom and his guests). So why does this seemingly insignificant miracle “reveal Jesus’s glory” and compel the newly-called disciples to believe in him?

Turning water into wine—the miracle itself—is not what is significant about this story for John. For John the signs and symbols—the meaning ascribed to actions, events, and even places—are central to this gospel. The author of the gospel records real events, but goes beyond the actual events to interpret them; he uses symbolism to convey the mystery of the person of Jesus. The characters in the text and the readers of John’s gospel must make a decision: to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and walk in the light, or choose the darkness of non-belief. And this story, John tells us, shows “the first of signs” to the reader that Jesus is the Messiah.

The sign is not the miracle of water-into-wine, but the symbolism of the wine—specifically the twenty to thirty gallons per jar.

John is a Jewish believer in Jesus and is writing to a Jewish audience; and, both the writer and the original audience know their Jewish apocalyptic literature. The Book of Enoch, for example, is a Jewish apocalyptic writing, written during the era of the Second Temple and the Maccabean Revolt, 150 to 200 years before the birth of Jesus. It was ultimately excluded from the Jewish canon, but widely known and circulated at the time; and it was very influential to many New Testament writers, especially the writer of the book of Revelation. In the Book of Enoch, the writer describes his visits to Heaven in the form of travels, visions and dreams, and his revelations of the end times—the coming of Messiah. In one of the visions he describes the world following the Messiah’s coming:

And then shall the whole earth be tilled in righteousness, and shall all be planted with trees and be full of blessing. And all desirable trees shall be planted on it, and they shall plant vines on it: and the vine which they plant thereon shall yield wine in abundance. (1 Enoch 10.18-19)

Similarly, Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lugdunum and one of the leaders of the early church in the 2nd Century, recounts this vineyard symbolism of the Kingdom of God. Irenaeus writes:

As the elders who saw John, the disciple of the Lord, related that they had heard from him how the Lord used to teach in regard to these times, and say: The days will come, in which vines shall grow, each having ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs, and in each true twig ten thousand shoots, and in each one of the shoots ten thousand dusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes, and every grape when pressed will give five and twenty metretes of wine. (*Irenaeus Against Heresies*, Book V, Chapter XXXIII)

So, the original readers/hearers of John’s gospel would have understood the symbolism of the jars of wine in measures of twenty to thirty gallons. The steward and the bridegroom in the story, the servants and the wedding guests, and especially the disciples would have seen this as a sign. They understood the imagery: grapes in

heaven so large that one grape yields twenty to thirty gallons of wine. The Messiah brings with him abundance.

Jesus's miracle at the wedding Cana is a sign: the Messiah has come. The Kingdom of God is not a future wish of streets of gold floating on a cloud in outer space; the Reign of God is realized right here, right now.

Jesus sees beyond a local event—a wedding in Cana—to the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, the realization of Heaven on Earth—here and now. Jesus looks beyond Cana and even Galilee and sees a region, a land, and even a world likened to Heaven, with all of humanity living in abundance.

The large quantity of wine is an image of the prophesied abundance ushered in by the Messiah; John's readers understood the allusion just as today the phrase "I have a dream" invokes an image for each of us—an image of unity or equality, an image of peace and justice, an image of civil rights and equal protections.

Just as twenty or thirty gallons of wine invoked an image and John's readers saw beyond a wedding celebration, "I have a dream" calls forth an image and we see beyond a... a dream a person had while sleeping. We see beyond to a world of hope, of harmony, of liberation, and of love.

Dr. King's theology and his social consciousness captivated the hearts and minds of others who also understood that oppression of one is oppression of all... equality, equal rights for one population is true civil rights for everyone. King's public ministry and civil rights activism began by specifically addressing the racism and classism so visibly obvious in the Montgomery public bus system. As his voice rose to a national audience, and as the civil rights movement grew and matured, the social consciousness grew to include gender equity and speaking out against racism. As Dr. King continued to advance both an ideology and a practice of nonviolence, he also began to speak out against the war in Vietnam.

On April 4, 1967—one year to the day before his assassination—Dr. King delivered an address titled "Beyond Vietnam" to the Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, at Riverside Church in New York City. [The title of this sermon, "Beyond Cana," seeks humbly and inadequately to pay homage to that courage speech by Dr. King.] In that address, Dr. King reflects back to the beginning of his public ministry to what we now know was the beginning of the end of his advocacy and activism. Recognizing the non-inclusive language of the time, I read from Dr. King's address:

[A]s I try to explain for you and for myself the road that leads from Montgomery to this place, I would have offered all that was most valid if I simply said that I must be true to my conviction that I share with all men the calling to be a son of the living God. Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed is this vocation of sonship and brotherhood. Because I believe that the Father is deeply concerned, especially for His suffering and helpless and outcast children, I come tonight to speak for them. This I believe to be the privilege and the burden of all of us who deem ourselves bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism and which go beyond our nation's self-defined goals and positions. We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, for those it calls

"enemy," for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers. ("Beyond Vietnam")

These words invoke the notion of the Reign of God. These words are not simply a future wish for an end to this one specific military conflict; these words look beyond to a world likened to Heaven, with all of humanity living in peace, with justice and equality.

Earlier I said that the segregation on the Montgomery public bus system was a "symptom to how this larger injustice actually injured all of God's people—black and white—and how it kept them from living into the fullness of God's creation and the realization of Jesus's vision of the Reign of God—the Kingdom of Heaven—here and now." Dr. King spoke similarly of the war in Vietnam. In his address at Riverside Church he said:

The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality—and if we ignore this sobering reality—we will find ourselves organizing "clergy and laymen concerned" committees for the next generation. They will be concerned about Guatemala and Peru. They will be concerned about Thailand and Cambodia. They will be concerned about Mozambique and South Africa. We will be marching for these and a dozen other names and attending rallies without end unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy. So such thoughts take us beyond Vietnam, but not beyond our calling as sons of the living God. ("Beyond Vietnam")

Thus, Dr. King called us to think beyond a single event or issue—in his context Montgomery or Vietnam—to the broader values—Christian values—of freedom, equality, liberation, and human dignity for all.

Dr. King entreats us today to look beyond the controversial issues that present divide not only our country politically but also our church theologically. We must recognize that they are but symptomatic of political and theological ideologies that seek to divide rather than unite, to oppress rather than liberate, to exclude rather than to embrace.

Yes, they are issues that are causing pain and suffering and are exemplifying injustice and discrimination; and, they must be confronted directly and nonviolently. But if we fail to look beyond the symptoms to the cause or causes of the injustice, we will only face these destructive symptoms again.

This relationship between the symptom and the cause—between the here-and-now and the not-yet-realized—is also a theme in later chapters of the book of Isaiah. Chapters 40-66 of Isaiah, written by an anonymous author immediately before the fall of Babylon, emphasize the significance of historical events in God's plan, a plan that extends from creation to redemption... and beyond. Second Isaiah offers a concept of transcendence and a moving vision of the assured hope of God's people. Isaiah 62 envisions a restored Jewish community and an end to the Babylonian exile. It begins:

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.
The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the Lord will give.
You shall be a crown of beauty in the
hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in
the hand of your God.

You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed
Desolate;
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land Married
for the Lord delights in you,
and your land shall be married.
For as a young man marries a young woman,
so shall your builder marry you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you.

(Isaiah 62.1-5)

I do not believe the lectionary's bringing this text together with the wedding at Cana story in John is coincidental. The metaphor of marriage, or a wedding, signifies looking beyond one's self to a life in relationship. The wedding ceremony looks beyond the event and forward to an optimistic, loving, and hopeful future.

On this holiday honoring the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., these stories both inspire and challenge us to look beyond... but to look beyond to the here and now! Dr. King's wisdom and his courageous actions both inspire and challenge us to join in the work to realize the Reign of God. Isaiah's vision looks beyond the Babylonian exile to a more hopeful future and the fulfillment of God's promise not only for Jerusalem but for all of God's people.

Jesus looks beyond Cana to the wondrous possibilities of the fulfillment of the Reign of God in the here and now. Jesus began his ministry in Cana with a simple act that wowed the newly called disciples and they believed in him.

Dr. King looked beyond Montgomery (and beyond Vietnam) to the "dream" of humanity living in peace, with justice and equality. Dr. King began his public ministry and civil rights witness in Montgomery, Alabama, by organizing a bus boycott, and others joined the cause.

Claudette Colvin looked beyond the rear exit of the bus to a life that was not divided by race and class. She began by staying seated; she was not alone.

What is it that you look beyond? And what vision do you look to... not as a pie-in-the-sky futuristic wish, but something you can help to realize in the here-and-now?

Where do you begin?